

A tale of one city

A TOWN on a low hill by the sea with winding cobblestone streets could describe pretty much any traditional Greek island settlement, but Gournia is special, for the stepped, stone-paved lanes were laid more than 2,500 years ago.

Gournia, near Pachia Ammos in eastern Crete, is one of the best-preserved prehistoric sites in Greece. It offers a unique opportunity to get a sense of daily urban life in a town that thrived between 1700 and 1450BC. Originally excavated in the early 20th century, the dig is still undergoing study, primarily by American scholars.

The most striking aspect of Gournia is the apparent completeness of its remains. Although all the structures have been reduced to their foundations, virtually the entire plan of the settlement, or at least its centre, is clearly visible.

Curved lanes, solidly paved with large cobblestones, follow the contour of the hill, and are joined by narrow stairways that lead straight to the hilltop.

Unique find

Climbing them, one walks by what makes Gournia so unique: the remains of hundreds of homes. These are not the mansions or villas found in prominent Minoan centres such as Knossos, but more ordinary, modest structures, never measuring much more than 5m².

Typically, a little stairway, protruding into the street, gives access to the entrance, often marked by a fine threshold block. Inside, there is usually a courtyard, carefully paved with flat stone slabs, surrounded by a series of small rooms.

What survives are only the stone foundations, as the rest of the build-



What some observers call a palace is marked by solid ashlar walls

ings were made of more fragile mud-brick and wood. Thus, the rooms we see mostly represent basements, used for storage and similar purposes. In many houses, the bottom steps of internal stairs point to the existence of upper storeys, where the living space would have been.

Beauty in detail

Here and there, modern information panels mark particularly interesting features, as many of the houses contain surprisingly well-preserved details. In one, a platform for treading grapes to make wine survives, and, in another, a carefully built framed window can be made out. Some houses have internal cupboards built into the walls, and virtually all of them feature large quernstones, two stones used for grinding grain known as gournia. These were so copious on the site even before excavation that they gave Gournia its modern name.

Sadly, the Minoan name of the town remains unknown.

Farmers and craftsmen

ALONG WITH the pottery and

bronze tools found in them, the houses of Gournia create the impression of a reasonably affluent but hardly rich town.

Here lived a few thousand farmers and craftsmen, with little evidence of social stratification or hierarchy. They were probably involved in trade with the larger Minoan centres at Mallia, Knossos and elsewhere.

Only a few buildings on the hilltop at the centre of the site depart from this pattern. Here, the remains of what is sometimes called a palace - sceptics call it a "palatial building" - represent the public and administrative centre of the town.

It is distinguished by its size, by the use of finely dressed ashlar blocks in its foundations, and by the spaces it contains, which differ markedly from the private homes.

A large open square marks the palace entrance, perhaps used for public gatherings or ceremonies. A finely built cornered stairway gives access to the interior.

Here, now hard to make out, an open courtyard was separated by a series of pillars from a large hall. The western

and northern parts of the large edifice contain rows of magazines, storage spaces linked by corridors. It was here that agricultural surplus, like oil and grain, was stored, to be redistributed or used for public events. It seems likely that this building was the seat of a local ruler or official.

The hilltop also appears to have been the symbolic or religious centre of Gournia. A curious standing stone built into the lane outside the palace's southwest corner, and associated with a clay drain reaching here from the palace square, is believed by some scholars to be a sacred rock.

Further north, a short path branching off the same lane leads to a small single-roomed structure. On the bench along its back wall, a series of clay figurines were found, perhaps indicating that this building was a small shrine or temple.

Hostile takeover?

A LARGE structure to the south of Gournia's so-called palace is of a later date, having been erected after the second half of the 2nd millennium. Most of the settlement appears to have been destroyed around 1450BC, along with much of Crete, in a sequence of events that may be connected with an invasion of Mycenaean from the Greek mainland.

After this destruction, a large megaron complex, with a main hall and outer porch, a typical feature of Mycenaean representative architecture, were placed just south of the palace ruins.

Further features of the site were discovered by American archaeologists in recent years, but are not currently accessible to the public. They include harbour installations and a possible fortification wall.

Gournia is located immediately beside the main road from Agios Nikolaos to Siteia/Ierapetra, about 15km outside Agios Nikolaos. The site is open from 8.30am to 3pm. Admission is 2 euros (concessions 1 euro). It is also reachable by bus from Agios Nikolaos.

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THESE images of houses (Photo 4), made of faience, an early form of glass, are part of the so-called Town Mosaic. They were discovered in the Minoan palace of Knossos and date to the 17th century BC. They probably once decorated a piece of furniture and perhaps they depicted a real town, such as Knossos itself. The carefully crafted plaques depict a series of houses, all subtly different, with various detailed features, among them masonry, wooden beams, doors and windows.